

Divine Ideals, Human Stubbornness, and Scriptural Inerrancy

Many of the questions which an ethicist has to handle are **not directly addressed in scripture**. **This raises one set of issues for someone who is concerned to allow scripture to shape our thinking and our lives.** Scripture does deal **explicitly with many other areas of contemporary concern such as homosexuality, divorce or feminism.** **How do we handle the variety of attitudes that scripture takes to them? Our approach to this question also has implications for our attitude to the question of the inerrancy of scripture.**

Tensions in Scripture

My starting-point in scripture is a characteristic feature of the Book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy emphasizes values such as justice, concern for the needy, brotherhood (with its implications for attitudes and behaviour with the people of God conceived as a family), womanhood with the privileges and responsibilities that belong to women as much as to men, family order protected by the outlawing of various forms of sexual relationships, and human happiness and joy. At the same time, aspects of its attitudes **can seem nationalistic, discriminatory, and legalistic.** Specific requirements such as the slaughter of entire **Canaanite communities, the stoning of a rebellious son,** and the banning of the deformed, the illegitimate, and foreigners from Yahweh's assembly, may also seem to sit uneasily with those values noted above. While theological considerations (such as the importance of preserving Israel's distinctiveness) underlie some of these later **features, the tension with Deuteronomy's behavioural values also requires** ethical consideration.

Jesus and Divorce

Jesus provides a helpful pointer to the way we may view the diversity of scripture's teaching on questions of behaviour. In Mark 10 some Pharisees raise the question: What attitude should we take to divorce? Jesus directed them back to scripture: What did Moses command you? That establishes that the scriptures are the right place to **turn for the answer to questions about moral behaviour.** The Pharisees, too, accepted this in theory, though they **were always in danger of overlaying the scriptures themselves** with the results of years of discussion of what scripture meant and implied for the life of the people of God. They warn us that it is possible to be so convinced **that we know what Scripture means and that we are committed to living by scripture** that we stop reading it with **open eyes.** **They have a ready answer to his question about Moses' teaching on divorce:** Deuteronomy 24 makes it clear that **Moses allowed it. That observation was true but was oversimplified.** It only included part of what the Torah said **about this particular issue and confined its attention too** narrowly to the one passage where Moses explicitly **referred to divorce.** **Yet other passages in the Torah were at least as relevant to an understanding of divorce, even** though they did not directly mention it. Jesus quotes too, from the end of Genesis 1 and the end of Genesis 2, passages which indicate that from the beginning **marriage was intended to be a lifelong mutual commitment. Given that purpose, divorce is inconceivable. Divorce is incompatible with the nature of marriage.** It follows that remarriage after divorce is equally impossible. What, then, of Deuteronomy 24? This law accepts that **divorce (and not merely marriage breakdown and separation) happens. It was given, Jesus explains, 'for your hardness of hearts': because people were stubborn and** unteachable and would not live in accordance with God's **revelation.**

Law and Human Sin

That theme runs through Deuteronomy, and lies behind many of its laws. Throughout the framework of its laws, Deuteronomy emphasizes the sinfulness of those to whom they are given. The historical survey of Israel's journey from Sinai to the Plains of Moab opens Moses' speech. He begins by recalling the burden that the people's contentiousness placed on him (e.g. 1:26-27). The land is to be

given them despite their sin rather than because of their righteousness: in reminding them of their stubborn rebelliousness, **Moses utilizes the actual terms which are later** taken up by Jesus in Mark 10 (e.g. 9:6, 13, 27). The material after the actual laws emphasizes that Israel's sinfulness will inevitably mean that the laws are not obeyed (e.g. 29:4). Deuteronomy nevertheless urges obedience to its laws on the basis that they are not rarified, incomprehensible, or inaccessible (30:11-14). For Old Testament law starts from the same legal tradition as Israel knew from **her environment in Mesopotamia and Canaan, as well as** from the ethos of the clan as this had developed over the centuries. **It thus starts from the experience and the reality of human life in its sinfulness.** It is because of human sin, then, that Israel needs laws on poverty, slavery, marital and family problems, and other such topics. All these areas of life reflect the presence of sin within the people of God. Although it is God who gives his people laws to regulate these areas, each of them **is open to the same statement that Jesus makes with regard to divorce in particular: they were not part of the way God created the world as the Torah itself describes** In the light of Israel's sinfulness, simply to condemn Or **outlaw these problems would be unrealistic.** Deuteronomy's policy is to seek to control them as far as possible and to limit their evil effects. It seeks to harness them to the ethical and theological values it propounds, and to pull Israel's life nearer God's ideal for her. It presupposes that it is foolish to pretend that we are still living in the Garden of Eden. It starts where people are. The very form of its laws ('If/when certain situations "lise ...') illustrates this. But it has not lost a vision of the life God longs his people to live and to enjoy. It therefore seeks to live realistically with the tension between where people are and where ideally they should be, neither giving in to where they are, nor setting such a tension between that and where they should be that the rope by which it is pulling them simply snaps. Deuteronomy attempts to do something about things that the prophets merely lament. **2 So Deuteronomy recognizes impoverishment and slavery through debt.** But it emphasizes care for the needy, **sets a time-limit to slavery. and requires that a slave be treated as a brother** (a fellow-member of God's family), be allowed to worship with the rest of God's people, and be treated generously when he is released to help him reestablish himself as a free man. It allows divorce, but **protects the marriage relationship by bans on various form of pre- and extra-marital sex, by exempting the newly married man from military or other public service, and by insisting that divorce is once-and-for-all** (it cannot be reversed, so should not be undertaken lightly). It acknowledges that in marriage a man has much of the power, yet emphasizes the privileges and the responsibilities of mothers, wives, and daughters alongside those of fathers, husbands, and sons, and describes Israel's God in feminine as well as in masculine terms (32: 11, 18). The Torah lives with a tension between how things are and how they once were and were meant to be. Like the prophets (only more so), Jesus declares that how they once were and were meant to be is still God's will: it is how they will once again be, and how they must be in the lives of his followers. **Compromise under the New Covenant**** It might be expected that compromises like those of Deuteronomy therefore belong only to the past. They were an inevitable part of the Old Testament dispensation, but they **have no place under the new covenant.** **3 At least some of** them, however, are explicitly present in the New Testament itself. In the New Testament world, the institution of slavery was probably a harsher reality than it was in Old Testament Israel, **4 but the New Testament epistles accept it and assume that slave-owners and slaves themselves will continue to operate within its terms.** Of course, the New Testament accepts the Old Testament's conviction that the way God created and redeemed people makes them one in freedom and subverts the notion of slavery. It waters the seed sown in Old Testament times which would issue centuries later in the fruit of the abolition of slavery in much of the world where it had long been accepted. But the New Testament does not hint at such a concern itself. It, too, **manifests an unresolved tension between a theology and an ethic that excludes slavery, and an acceptance of slavery in practice.** **Even after Christ 'we live on the next to last word, and believe in the last' (D. Bonhoeffer')** **Something similar is true about divorce. 'Divorce must not be accepted', says Jesus in Mark 10; of fornication' says Jesus in Matthew 19.** There is disagreement about what is meant by 'fornication', but it does not affect the argument here. There is also disagreement about whether Matthew is telling us something Jesus actually said which Mark omits, telling us something Jesus implied and Mark took for granted, or telling us something that the early church was led to conclude that Jesus would have said if he were confronted by the pastoral needs it experienced. But again this does not affect the argument here. Despite Genesis 1-2, in Matthew Jesus accepts that **divorce must sometimes happen, and sets an example for** his followers in the way they handle real life within the people of God still living East of Eden. **In the case of both slavery and divorce there is a tension** within the Old Testament and the New over whether these can be accepted. Each Testament implies, 'No, they cannot be accepted as part of the way God created the world and means it to be, especially among his own people' , but also, 'Yes, they have to be accepted as part of the way the **world now is, even among his own people'. Homosexuality****

How far can this approach be applied to the other problematic issues we mentioned? **Homosexuality differs from divorce and slavery in that there seems to be no hint in scripture of the kind of tension we have been discussing.** Homosexual behaviour was a familiar feature of Old and New Testament times. **But scripture never takes a positive stance about it. Scripture has a vision for same-sex loving,** as the story of David and Jonathan shows, but explicitly **accepts genital sexual activity exclusively in heterosexual relationships. Scripture encourages us to be supportive of people whose instincts drive them towards homosexual behaviour,** but does not extend that love and support to encouraging them to believe that the Bible views this as either God's best or God's second best for people. The **Bible's overt attitude to it is quite consistent."** **Sexism**** There is some tension in its attitudes to sexism. **We have noted its presence in Deuteronomy. In the gospels women have an extraordinarily important place in the circle around Jesus and in his attitudes.** But they are not among the Twelve. The epistles reaffirm the Old Testament view **that women and men are one by creation and by redemption, yet speak in subordinationist terms in passages such as 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, and 1 Timothy 2.** In the account of how things were at the Beginning, **there is no suggestion of subordination in Genesis 1 and only ambiguous hints of it in Genesis 2.** The equality and **mutual dependence of man and woman are affirmed** more clearly than any subordination of one to the other. Subordination appears only when both disobey God (3: 16). In that context "To love and to cherish" becomes "To desire and to dominate" (Kidner⁸). Subsequent subordinationist strands of both Testaments are part of **inspired scripture, but so are its commands concerning the place of slaves. In both cases these are in tension with other statements regarding the oneness of male and female or master and slave. A century or two ago, Christians (and others) who were free themselves or who were slave-owners** were able to bring about the freedom of many Christian slaves (and others), so that they were able to share with them the position that God intended for them from the Beginning. If the parallel in the way that scripture handles slavery and subordinationism holds, in the present context Christians (and others) who are seeking to **enable Christian women (and others) to receive broader privileges, responsibilities, and opportunities that men** have traditionally monopolized, are seeking to fulfil a **vision as biblical as that of the emancipationists a century or two ago.** For the ethicist, as for the theologian, then, interpreting **scripture and submitting oneself to it involves seeking to do justice to the variety of perspectives it sometimes offers on particular themes. It does not involve opting for one or other of these perspectives arbitrarily or grading them in accordance with priorities we bring to the material. We must seek to perceive the priorities that scripture itself suggests as it lives with the fact that those it addresses live in a world very far from God's design.** **Authority and Inerrancy**** How, then, do we view the authority and inerrancy of **material that seems to reflect God's gracious condescension to the stubbornness of people living East of Eden?** It is **possible to ascribe to this material too much or too little authority.** We give it too much authority if we fail to recognize that **it does not reveal God's ultimate standards to us.** The fact that God issues a certain command to people in the Old or New Testament does not in itself mean that this **command applies to us. We have to set this command in the context of scripture as a whole and ask whether we have the right or the obligation to apply it to ourselves. We may discharge ourselves too easily if we appropriate some verse of scripture which allows or requires divorce or subordination of women to men.** On the other side in the inerrancy debate, however, it is easy to rob particular scriptures of any authority at all. **There is a sense in which we take away all scripture's authority when we decide for ourselves which parts of scripture are going to be scripture for us."** **Even where scripture is making concessions to human sinfulness, it does so by God's revelatory grace.** The way it speaks will teach us about God's priorities. It models the way to hold the tension between calling the world and the church to be what it was designed to be from the Beginning and will be at the End, and acknowledging the reality of what the world and the church are in between. **We have to be aware of the temptation to categorize some scripture as written because of people's stubbornness** and to believe it does not apply to us, when actually it expresses an aspect of God's ultimate will which we do not like.¹⁰ **It is easy to culture-relativize the Bible along with everything else, except ourselves. We easily miss the possibility that what may be the 'insights' that our generation is privileged to perceive with particular clarity may actually be our generation's blindspots.** If there are no points at which the views of the average intelligent, cultured, sensitive North Atlantic or Asian believer or unbeliever is wrong, it would be rather surprising. Scripture is our privileged resource for identifying where the mistakes may be. The points where scripture's attitudes differ from ours are therefore particularly important and are not to be silenced too easily. **In my comments on feminism/subordinationism, for instance, I have equivocated over the nature of the tension in scripture's attitudes, because even if Genesis 2 ascribes no headship to man by the nature of his creation, the New Testament apparently does so. This differentiation does not just belong East of Eden. The vision of the husband-wife relationship in Ephesians 5 is certainly not male chauvinist, but is equally certainly not feminist. We would be unwise to assume that the feminist one must be right and the Ephesians one must be written 'for your hardness of hearts'.** So

there are temptations involved in seeking to discern where scripture reveals to us God's ultimate will and where he makes concessions to our stubbornness. But that it does so is part of its own testimony. It assumes that half measures are better than no measures. It offers us a paradigm of the task that ethicist, social worker, reformer, legislator and pastor have to undertake as they seek to draw praxis in society and church as near as possible to the vision God has for it, without being unrealistically far away from the values that society and church (in its social context) themselves actually accept.

1. A longer version of an article published in *The Other Side* 143 (1983) 20-21; see further ch.: *Why my Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming 1985).

2. See R. Botssonerd and F. Vouga, 'Pour une éthique de la propriété: essais sur le Deutéronome', *Bulletin du Centre Protestant d'Etudes* 32 (1980) 39-40.

3. So K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 16 (London/New York: OLT/Seabury, 1979) 190; ET from *Schriften zur Theologie* 12 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1975), 240.

4. So B. Vawter, 'A tale of two cities', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 15 (1978) 268.

5. *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: Collins Fontana, 1959) 50, = enlarged edition (London/New York: SCM/Macmillan, 1971) 157; ET from *Widerstand und Ergebung* (Munich: Kaiser, enlarged edition, 1970) 112-3.

6. For the view that the Bible's negative attitude to homosexual activity does not imply that an acceptance of biblical authority involves disapproving of homosexual activity, see e.g. articles by M. Olsen and J. F. Alexander in *The Other Side* 151 (April 1984) 24-31.

7. See P. Tribble's study of Gen. 2-3 in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 72-143.

8. D. Kidner, *Genesis* (London: IVP, 1967) 71.

9. Cf. James 2: 10. In some other senses of authority, of course, this is not the case. See the analysis of the meanings of authority in e.g.

J. Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London/New York: SCM/Harper, 1973) 23-29.

10. This seems to me to be the danger risked by the evangelical handling of biblical texts on homosexual practice instanced in note 6: for instance, prohibitions in Leviticus are discounted (p.25) on grounds that would seem to imply that Old Testament law as a whole sheds little or no light on what God wants for us today.